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SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS, S/CT

NSC FOR E. MILLARD

LONDON FOR POL/RIEDEL

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TAGS: PGOV PTER PINS PINR MOPS PHUM CE LTTE

SUBJECT: LTTE pressure, cohabitation stresses, and friction with police act to demoralize military

Refs: (A) Colombo 1815

- (B) Colombo 1790, and previous

(U) Classified by Ambassador E. Ashley Wills. Reasons 1.5 (b, d).

11. (S) Summary: The Sri Lankan military is in a difficult period. According to sources, a number of factors are acting to demoralize the military, including pressure from the Tamil Tigers, stresses in the relationship between the PM and the President, and frictions with the police. The military as a whole appears to support the peace process, but there are some reports of dissension. Caught in a transition period between war and possible peace, the military is clearly troubled and needs careful tending by the GSL. End Summary.

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Difficult Period for the Military
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12. (S) There are increasing reports indicating that the Sri Lankan military is in a difficult period. Hardly a day goes by without the press reporting some sort of flare-up involving the armed forces. Many of these reports pit the military against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in some small incident or paint members of the military engaged in infighting with one another. Commenting on the rash of reports, Jehan Perera, the Director of the National Peace Council, a local think-tank, told polchief October 1 that he thought the military was in a "very confused state because it was caught in a transition period between war and possible peace." He noted that the military used to be focused on all-out confrontation versus the LTTE. With the ceasefire in effect, however the military does not have a "central objective" at this time and is "a bit lost."

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Pinpricks by the LTTE
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13. (S) An analysis of the latest reports indicates that several factors seem to be acting to demoralize the military, including pressure from the Tamil Tigers, stresses in the relationship between the PM and the President, and frictions with the police. With respect to the first factor, the LTTE seems to be engaged in a strategy of engaging the military in small pinprick-type actions that fall well short of war, but are meant to harass and preoccupy.

14. (S) One of the more serious of these problematic incidents involves the ongoing detention of seven Sri Lankan soldiers held by the LTTE since September 25 (see Ref A). The LTTE has demanded the release of two of its cadre in exchange for the release of the soldiers. Based on what we are hearing, the GSL -- not wanting the incident to become a crisis -- is squirming to find a way to release the LTTE cadre. (Note: Miliinda Moragoda, an important minister, told DCM, October 2, that the GSL is "leaning" on the judicial system to speed up the processing of the two LTTE detainees so that they can be eligible for bail as soon as possible.) In the meantime, the military is helpless to do anything. Brigadier Peiris, the Director of Legal Affairs at Army Headquarters, told us that the incident was shameful to the military, especially given the fact that families of the soldiers have been publicly demonstrating for their release, but to no avail.

15. (S) Another incident that has disturbed the military was the attempted overrunning of a military post located in the town of Point Pedro in Jaffna on September 2. During this incident, a large group of Tamil grade school students attacked the post, damaging a number of

bunkers and other military positions before being driven back. Several people were injured in the attack, which was apparently instigated by the LTTE. In discussions with Mission, military officers report dozens of smaller but similar incidents involving troops who were physically or verbally harassed by LTTE cadre or pro-LTTE Tamils in various demeaning ways. Again, due to the ceasefire, the military has not been able to do much to counter the LTTE and prevent such incidents.

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Cohabitation Stresses

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16. (S) Stresses in the cohabitation relationship between the Prime Minister and President Kumaratunga also seem to be playing a role in the military's troubles. Essentially, the deep tensions between the PM and the President are creating an unstable situation for the military in that it is not quite certain who it is that it reports to.

17. (S) The crux of the confusion comes from the fact that the PM is clearly politically the most powerful person in the country at this time, while Kumaratunga technically remains commander-in-chief of the armed forces under the terms of the Sri Lankan Constitution. Caught in this ambiguity, the military in effect is being forced to choose which side's strategic vision to support, i.e., the PM's peace initiative or the president's more skeptical approach. (Note: Milinda Moragoda told us that he was so worried about the "politicization" of peace issues that on October 1 he had urged former Foreign Minister Kadirgamar, a key presidential adviser, to ensure that the president and her supporters acted in a more bipartisan fashion.)

18. (S) Meanwhile, the stresses between the PM and the president are also being played out in the area of personnel. The president, for example, recently extended the Army and Navy commanders' terms of office without consultation with the GSL. We have heard that the president's actions, though legal, have been seen as interference by many in the military, who see her as rewarding officers she sees as her allies, while retarding the careers of others who are not. (Note: This has helped spark some infighting in the military. The Naval commander, for example, has accused his own chief of staff of spying on him, claiming that the latter is angry over the extension. Adding to this confusion is the fact that the Naval commander is known to be pro-president, while the chief of staff is thought to be close to the PM. End Note.)

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Friction with the Police

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19. (S) Another problematic area for the military involves its reported tensions with the police. Milinda Moragoda told DCM that the relationship between the police and the military is a tricky one. Moragoda explained that the genesis of the problem was the perception by some in the police that the military took advantage of the situation when the police were within the Ministry of Defense. With responsibility for the police placed back in the Ministry of Interior upon the installation of the new government in December 2001, Moragoda related that the police have become more confident in challenging military authority.

110. (S) An example of police/military tensions coming to a head was a police raid on a military facility in January 2002. In this incident, the police, acting on a tip (apparently from someone in the military itself), raided a safe house kept by military intelligence, arrested six soldiers, and seized arms and ammunition. The raid infuriated the military because the safe house was being used by members of a top secret anti-LTTE deep penetration unit that had its cover blown in the widely publicized raid. Although the soldiers have since been released, it is still possible that a legal case against them may be pursued by the Attorney General's Office. Moragoda said the Director General of Military Intelligence (DGMI) also remained worried that he might be prosecuted in the matter, and, in fact, has had charges filed against him for allegedly plotting against the Prime Minister. (Note: These charges have not yet been publicly announced and we could not confirm them. Moragoda told us that the PM does not believe the charge and was chagrined when he found out that the police had filed these charges without checking with him, the Minister of Interior or the Minister of Defense.)

¶11. (S) Despite its many problems, the military as a whole appears to support the peace process. The Sri Lankan military has a long history of acquiescence to civilian authority and there is little indication of widespread objections to the government's peace moves within the force. Jehan Perera, for example, told us that he saw few signs that the military was seriously angry with the government over its peace initiative, although it was not happy to have been effectively sidelined due to the initiative's success. There were stresses, he noted, such as those over incidents with the LTTE (as described above), but he did not think the GSL and the military were headed toward any sort of break.

¶12. (S) That said, recent reports indicate that there may be some dissension. Per Ref B, for example, Nimal Goonetilleke (please protect), the head of the Police Special Task Force (STF), told RSO that he had heard that five or six high-ranking military officers (NFI) were actively speaking out against the peace process within their respective commands. He speculated that some of these officers might be angry because the peace process was beginning to undermine illicit activities they were engaged in. He had no information that anyone in the military was planning to take any sort of action against the GSL, however. In addition to Goonetilleke's report, a Sinhala-language weekly called "Lakjana" alleged in a September 29 article that a group of high-level brass in the Army was planning a coup in consultation with the president. The article did not provide any additional details or proof of its assertions, but it was the first press report of its kind that Mission has seen.

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Comment

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¶13. (S) The military is clearly in a difficult position. It feels increasingly marginalized by the peace process, especially against the backdrop of the central role it used to play in national affairs during the wartime conflict. The pressure it is facing from the LTTE and from working within a confusing cohabitation system is clearly demoralizing, if not potentially debilitating.

¶14. (S) Given this situation, the military needs careful tending by the GSL. While it seems in no mood to challenge the direction of the peace process, the government needs to work with the military carefully to ensure that it remains fully on board. Although obscured by the war, many of the military's problems also have deep roots, which will take a serious commitment to reform to fix. One way the GSL is trying to assuage the military -- and nudge it toward reform -- is to underscore that the international community stands ready to assist it with advice, training, and material support. If the government fails in the delicate task of making the military more comfortable with its newfound situation, there is a possibility that it could become a wildcard element that potentially could be taken advantage of by hard-line political elements.

¶15. (S) Just back from R+R, the Ambassador has requested appointments with each of the service chiefs to gauge the military leadership's frame of mind. End Comment.

¶16. (U) Minimize considered.

WILLS